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S E C R E T BANGKOK 5138

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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: MASS, MARR, TH, CB

SUBJECT: DISCUSSIONS WITH FOREIGN MINISTER ON CAMBODIA AND U.S.
FORCE LEVELS

DEPARTMENT PASS SECDEF, CINCPAC, DIRNSA

1. I WAS CALLED TO THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, TO SEE
FOREIGN MINISTER CHATICHAI CHOONHAVAN, TODAY, MARCH 27. THIS
TELEGRAM BRIEFLY SUMMARIZES DISCUSSION. MORE DETAILED
ACCOUNTS WILL FOLLOW. DISCUSSIONS CENTERED AROUND U.S. AIR-
LIFT OPERATIONS FROM THAILAND IN SUPPORT OF CAMBODIA, PROS-
PECTS FOR CAMBODIA, AND U.S. FORCE LEVELS IN THAILAND.

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2. CONVERSATION OPENED WITH GENERAL DISCUSSION OF SECURITY

SITUATION IN CAMBODIA. I GAVE CHATICHAI STANDARD BRIEFING WE HAVE BEEN USING HERE, NOT CONCEALING DIFFICULT MILITARY SITUATION BUT STATING VIEW THAT GKR HAD CHANCE OF SURVIVING THROUGH DRY SEASON IF U.S. SUPPORT CONTINUED, AND STRESSING THAT THIS WAS ESSENTIAL IF SITUATION IN CAMBODIA WAS NOT TO CALLPASE TO GREAT DISADVANTAGE OF THAILAND.

3. CHATICHAI MADE A FEW GENERAL REMARKS ABOUT THE RTG'S CURRENT VIEW OF CAMBODIA. THAI POLICY WAS TO LET THE KHMER WORK OUT THEIR OWN ARRANGEMENTS. THAILAND DID NOT WISH TO INTERFERE OR INTERVENE IN THIS PROCESS. THE THAI HAD TO LOOK AHEAD TO THE POSSIBILITY OF A KHMER ROUGE VICTORY, AND WISHED TO AVOID PUTTING THEMSELVES IN A POSITION COMPARABLE TO THAT WHICH THEY OCCUPIED VIS-A-VIS HANOI AS RESULT OF THAI INVOLVEMENT IN THE WAR IN VIETNAM.

4. CHATICHAI THEN BROUGHT UP THE QUESTION OF U.S. AIRLIFT OPERATIONS. SPEAKING, HE SAID, FOR THE PRIME MINISTER, CHATICHAI SAID THAT THE FLIGHTS COULD CONTINUE FOR HUMANITARIAN PURPOSES. ALTHOUGH IT COULD NOT BE SAID IN PUBLIC, THE PRIME MINISTER FELT THAT IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS, AMMUNITION COULD BE CARRIED. THE IMPORTANT THING WAS TO AVOID PUBLIC DISCLOSURE OF THIS FACT.

5. I EMPHASIZED THAT THE FULL-RANGE OF AIRLIFT SUPPORT, ONLY PART OF WHICH WAS AMMO, WAS ESSENTIAL TO SUSTAIN THE GKR AND SAID THAT MY GOVERNMENT WOULD TAKE A MOST SERIOUS VIEW OF ANY EFFORTS TO INTERRUPT IT.

6. CHATICHAI RETREATED TO REASSURANCE THAT RTG HAD NOT CHANGED ITS POLICY TOWARD GKR BUT ONLY WANTED TO TAKE CERTAIN SAFEGUARDS TO TAKE ACCOUNT OF DOMESTIC POLITICAL SITUATION. HE CAREFULLY AVOIDED ORDERING A HALT TO THE AMMO LIFT BUT REPEATEDLY EMPHASIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF DESCRIBING THE AIRLIFT IN PUBLIC AS HUMANITARIAN IN NATURE AND AVOIDING STEPS THAT WOULD BLOS THIS COVER. HE AND MFA DIRECTOR GENERAL OF INFORMATION PRACHA, WHO WAS ALSO PRESENT, COMPLAINED ABOUT THE ALMOST DAILY PUBLICITY COMING OUT OF PHNOM PENH ON THE ARRIVAL OF AMMUNITION FROM THAILAND AND ASKED THAT ALL POSSIBLE
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MEASURES BE TAKEN TO ELIMINATE THIS.

7. I SAID THAT WHILE IT WAS POSSIBLE TO EXERCISE SOME CONTROL OVER OFFICIAL STATEMENTS TO THE PRESS, IT WAS MUCH MORE DIFFICULT TO PREVENT THE PRESS FROM REPORTING WHAT IT COULD ACTUALLY SEE. I AGREED THAT WE WOULD DO WHAT WE COULD TO AVOID PUBLIC DIFFICULTIES FOR THE RTG, ALTHOUGH WE COULD NOT GUARANTEE 100 PERCENT SUCCESS. AND

I STRESSED THAT BOTH SIDES, THAI AS WELL AS UMS.,
SHOULD FOLLOW THE SAME POLICY OF SAYING AS LITTLE AS
POSSIBLE ON THE AIRLIFT TO THE PRESS.

8. CHATICHAI PROBED REPEATEDLY ON THE SUBJECT OF LON
NOL. HE SOUGHT TO ELICIT AN INDICATION THAT THE U.S.
COULD AND WOULD DUMP LON NOL, AND EXPRESSED A CLEAR
PREFERENCE FOR A SOLUTION THAT WOULD INCLUDE SIHANOUK
AS HEAD OF GOVERNMENT IN CAMBODIA. I CONFINED MYSELF
TO REPLYING THAT WE SUPPORTED THE GKR AND THAT LON NOL
WAS HEAD OF THAT GOVERNMENT. IF THE GKR REPLACED LON
NOL WITH ANOTHER HEAD, WE WOULD DEAL WITH HIM. BUT I
STRESSED THAT WE WOULD NOT BE A PARTY TO REMOVING LON
NOL. ANY SUCH ACTION, IF IT OCCURRED, WAS ENTIRELY UP
TO THE KHMER.

9. PICKING UP CHATICHAI'S COMMENT THAT THE KHMER
SHOULD SOLVE THEIR OWN PROBLEMS, I SAID WE FULLY SHARED
THIS VIEW. HOWEVER, BOTH SIDES HAD TO PLAY BY THESE RULES.
AS LONG AS HANOI CONTINUED ITS MASSIVE MATERIAL SUPPORT
FOR THE KHMER COMMUNISTS, IT WAS ESSENTIAL THAT THE U.S.
AND ITS FRIENDS AND ALLIES SUPPORT THE NON-COMMUNIST FORCES
TO THE BEST OF THEIR ABILITY. ONLY IN THIS WAY COULD
WE ENHANCE THE PROSPECTS FOR A GOVERNMENT INCLUDING THE
MORE MODERATE ELEMENTS. A KHMER ROUGE VICTORY WOULD USHER
IN A MILITANT, INTRACTABLE COMMUNIST REGIME AND PROBABLY
PRECIPITATE A BLOOD BATH. IF WE ALL HUNG IN THERE, WE
WOULD HAVE CHANCE OF ACHIEVING A BETTER OUTCOME. CHATICHAI
GAVE GRUDGING ASSENT.

10. ON U.S. FORCE LEVELS, CHATICHAI BEGAN BY READING
THE NEW GOVERNMENT'S POLICY STATEMENT ON THE SUBJECT,
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WHICH CALLED FOR A TOTAL WITHDRAWAL OF FOREIGN TROOPS
WITHIN ONE YEAR SUBJECT TO THE SECURITY SITUATION PRE-
VAILING IN THE AREA. CHATICHAI MADE REPEATED MENTION OF THE FACT

THAT THIS POLICY MADE WITHDRAWAL CONDITIONAL UPON
THE SECURITY SITUATION, AND STRONGLY IMPLIED THAT THE
GOVERNMENT INTENDED TO FALL BACK ON THIS AS AN ESCAPE
CLAUSE IF NECESSARY. HE SAID THAT WHEN THE THAI PEOPLE
TOOK IN THE FULL CONSEQUENCES OF EVENTS IN NEIGHBORING
COUNTRIES, AND PARTICULARLY SOUTH VIETNAM, THIS WOULD
PREPARE THE WAY FOR A SHIFT OF THE POLICY AWAY FROM THE ONE
YEAR DEADLINE. IN ORDER TO ALLOW THIS PROCESS TO WORK,
HOWEVER, IT WOULD BE NECESSARY FOR THE THAI AND U.S.
SIDES AT LEAST TO HOLD MEETINGS ON THE SUBJECT OF TROOP
CUTS. CHATICHAI TRIED TO PIN ME DOWN TO A FIRM COMMIT-

MENT THAT SUCH A MEETING WOULD BE HELD VERY SHORTLY.

1. I TOLD CHATICHAI THAT GIVEN EVENTS IN CAMBODIA AND VIETNAM, OUR PREFERENCE WOULD BE TO HAVE NO DISCUSSION OF TROOP CUTS AT THIS POINT, SINCE THIS WOULD PROVIDE THE WRONG SIGNALS. ONCE THROUGH THE DRY SEASON, WE WOULD BE READY NOT ONLY TO DISCUSS TROOP CUTS BUT TO MAKE SOME WITHDRAWALS AS WELL, BUT THE TIMING WAS VERY IMPORTANT. CHATICHAI CONTINUED TO PRESS NOT ONLY FOR A MEETING TO DISCUSS WITHDRAWAL BUT FOR EARLY WITHDRAWALS THEMSELVES, ALTHOUGH HE IMPLIED THAT INITIALLY VERY MODEST CUTS MIGHT SUFFICE. HE SAID THAT THIS WAS NECESSARY IN ORDER FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO RESPOND TO PRESSURES FROM WITHIN AND WITHOUT PARLIAMENT.

12. IN ORDER NOT TO DISRUPT OUR AGREEMENT ON THE AIRLIFT, I TOLD CHATICHAI THAT I THOUGHT THERE WOULD BE NO OBJECTION ON OUR SIDE TO A MEETING TO DISCUSS OUR MILITARY PRESENCE, PROVIDED IT DID NOT FOCUS ON TROOP CUTS. I SUGGESTED THE MEETING COULD BE DESCRIBED AS HAVING AS ITS OBJECTIVE A REVIEW OF THE U.S. FORCE PRESENCE IN THAILAND. CHATICHAI AND HIS ASSOCIATES SEEMED TO ASSENT TO THIS.

13. IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT BETWEEN THE DISCUSSION OF CAMBODIA AND OF U.S. FORCE LEVELS, CHATICHAI DEFTLY INSERTED A DISCUSSION OF INADEQUACIES IN THE EQUIPMENT OF
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THE THAI ARMED FORCES IN COMPARISON WITH THE MODERN WEAPONRY OF POTENTIALLY HOSTILE NEIGHBORS. (HE ALSO EXPLICITLY REFERRED TO HIS CONVERSATION ON THE SUBJECT LAST FALL WITH DEPUTY SECRETARY OF DEFENSE CLEMENTS, TO WHICH HE NOTED THERE HAD BEEN NO RESPONSE.) ALTHOUGH HE HIMSELF MADE NO DIRECT CONNECTION, THAT IMPLICATION WAS THAT IF THE U.S. COULD DO SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT FOR THAILAND IN SECURITY ASSISTANCE, THIS COULD HAVE A BEARING ON THAILAND'S ATTITUDE TOWARD BOTH U.S.-CAMBODIAN SUPPORT ACTIVITIES AND U.S. FORCE LEVELS IN THAILAND.

14. COMMENT: ON THE CAMBODIAN PROBLEM, THE RTG IS CLEARLY VERY NERVOUS ABOUT WHAT LIES AHEAD. IT IS NOT PREPARED TO MAKE AN OVERT AND ABRUPT CHANGE IN ITS CURRENT POLICY, INCLUDING RECOGNITION OF THE LON NOL GOVERNMENT, BUT IT WISHES TO LOWER ITS PROFILE TO THE VANISHING POINT IN TERMS OF MILITARY SUPPORT FOR THAT GOVERNMENT. I BELIEVE IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE THAI WILL PERMIT THE FULL RANGE OF OUR ACTIVITIES TO CONTINUE PROVIDED THE MILITARY SUPPLY COMPONENT (AMMO, ETC.) CAN BE KEPT FROM PUBLIC VIEW TO MAXIMUM EXTENT, AND THUS NOT BECOME AN ISSUE OF RTG CREDITABILITY. THIS WILL NOT BE EASY BUT WILL REQUIRE

THE BEST EFFORTS OF ALL OF US.

15. AS TO U.S. FORCE LEVELS, IN THE SHORT RUN, AT LEAST,
WE MAY BE ABLE TO NEGOTIATE A SATISFACTORY OUTCOME FROM
OUR POINT OF VIEW, BUT WE MUST EXPECT THAT THE THAI WILL
CONTINUE IN PUBLIC TO EMPHASIZE THE 12-MONTH DEADLINE
ASPECT OF THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICY. AS EVERYONE KNOWS,
CHATICHAI IS AN OPPORTUNISTIC POLITICAN AND A BLABBER-
MOUTH. I FULLY EXPECT THAT IN TOMORROW MORNING'S NEWSPAPERS,
I WILL READ HEADLINES SAYING SOMETHING LIKE "CHATICHAI
TELLS U.S. FORCES MUST GO'." OUR RECOMMENDATIONS
ON HOW TO HANDLE THIS WILL FOLLOW.
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